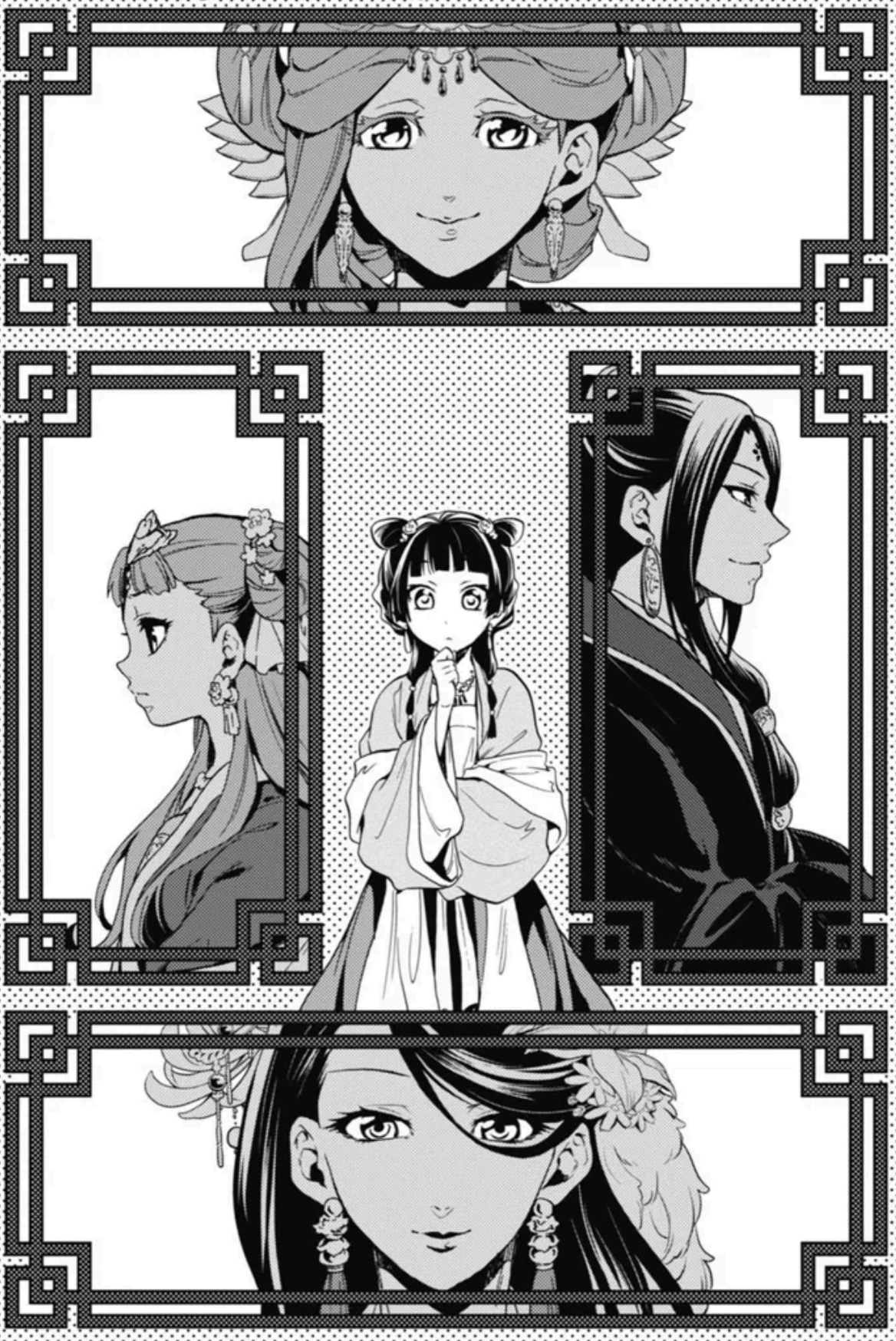
CRACKLE
CRACKLE
CRACKLE
I'M TOLD WE DON'T HAVE TO DO ANY-THING...
Chapter 7

WHOOOOOSH
ヒュオ
オオオオ
...IS ITS OWN KIND OF TORTURE.
...BUT HAVING NOTHING TO DO IN THIS CHILL ...
CLUNK
ドンメン
CLANK
ガシメン
I WISH THEY'D HURRY AND SET UP THE PAVILION ALREADY...
THE WIND IS FREEZ-ING!
IT'S SOOO COLD!
HUG
ぎゅう
HUG
ぎゅう
NOW I SEE WHY THE HEATED STONES WERE SO POPULAR ...

# Chapter 7 The Garden Banquet ②



SO WHO GETS THE SEAT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE EMPEROR?
THAT'S RESERVED FOR HIS MAJESTY'S YOUNGER BROTHER, WHO IS ALSO THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S SON.
SO...
WHISPER
...THE WOMAN SITTING BESIDE THE EMPEROR AND HOLDING THE PRINCESS...
...IS THE EMPRESS DOWAGER, THE LAST EMPEROR'S WIDOW.
SHE LOOKS INCREDIBLY YOUNG.
THAT'S BECAUSE SHE IS.
SO HE DOESN'T CARRY OUT HIS OFFICIAL DUTIES, THEN?
THEY SAY HE HAS A WEAK CONSTI-TUTION...
KOFF! KOFF!
I'VE HEARD ALL KINDS OF RUMORS ABOUT HIM.
...AND RARELY LEAVES HIS CHAMBERS.
DID YOU JUST CALL OUR DRESSES "BORING"?!
EXCUSE ME?!
THE EMPRESS DOWAGER... MUST'VE LABORED VERY HARD INDEED TO BEAR HIM.
...SHE WAS ONLY BLEEP YEARS OLD.
URK ...
YOU SEE, SHE HAD THE EM-PEROR WHEN...

GIGGLE GIGGLE
PFFT!
DID YOU HEAR THAT?
ARE YOU STUPID OR SOMETHING?
WE LADIES-IN-WAITING EXIST TO SERVE OUR MISTRESSES!
WHY WOULD WE GO OUT OF OUR WAY TO OVERDRESS?
THE MISTRESS IS THE ONE WHO SUFFERS WHEN HER ATTENDANTS DON'T PUT IN THE EFFORT TO LOOK THEIR BEST.
OH DEAR... THERE YINGHUA GOES AGAIN...
...PICKING FIGHTS ON BEHALF OF OUR LADY...
SNAP
DID YOU LEAVE THAT FRECKLE-FACE BEHIND TODAY?
...LIKE TO WAGE WAR WITH ONE ANOTHER IN PLACE OF THEIR MISTRESSES.
CRACKLE
CRACKLE
UNFORTUNATELY, THE ATTENDANTS TO THE FOUR CONSORTS...

I GUESS SHE HASN'T NOTICED ME YET.
WHO WOULD BESTOW A JEWELED ORNAMENT ON THAT CREATURE? IT WOULD BE A WASTE!
BRINGING SUCH AN UGLY GIRL ALONG WOULD ONLY PROVE A SOURCE OF GRAVE EMBARRASSMENT!
CACKLE
BUT OF COURSE YOU DID!
CACKLE
WE WERE GETTING ON SO WELL TOO...
...I'M GOING TO TELL MY FATHER ON YOU!
IF YOU KEEP ACTING SO UPPITY...
SLAM
EEK!
AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE
WHY SHOULD I HAVE TO DO THAT?!

WELL, THEN.
GRIN
I'LL JUST HAVE TO MAKE IT SO THAT YOU CAN'T TATTLE.
NGH!
SHOVE
OH.
DASH
NOOO
THE COURTESANS OF THE PLEASURE DISTRICT WOULD'VE APPRECIATED THAT JOKE...

HOW CRUEL TO HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN AFTER SPENDING TWO WHOLE MONTHS TOGETHER...
PFF! PFF! PFFT!

92

...LOOKS LIKE WE NEED REINING IN OVER HERE TOO, SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.
SCREEEEECH
SHP
!!
GRIN
WH-WHAT ?!
WHY HAVE YOU GONE QUIET ALL OF A SUDDEN?
AH!
AAH!
AGH!
PAAALE

?
I THINK WE'LL TAKE PITY ON YOU AND LEAVE IT THERE FOR T-TODAY!
I—
I—
I—

?
ZOOM
Y-YOU'D BETTER BE GRATE-FUL!

I'M SORRY YOU HAD TO HEAR THAT. DON'T TAKE IT TO HEART.
IT'S TRUE!
I MEAN, JUST LOOK AT HOW ADORABLE YOU ARE.
IT'S FINE. I DON'T CARE ABOUT THEM.

WHO DO THEY THINK THEY ARE?! HMPH!
I WAS NEVER FOND OF THEM TO BEGIN WITH, BUT STILL...!

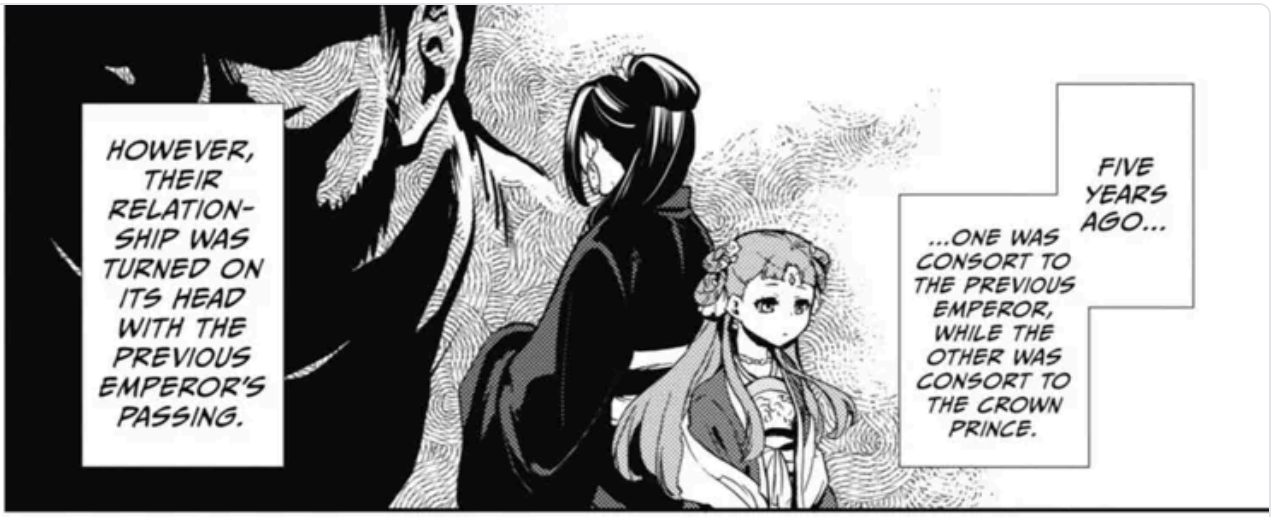
AWWW...
ANY-WAY...
ARE YOU ALL SURE YOU DON'T WANT TO CHANGE OUT YOUR STONES?
NOT TO MENTION SHE WAS MADE TO ENDURE TWO ENTIRE MONTHS...
WEEP
WEEP
...OF FEROCIOUS BULLYING AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE...
?
SOB
SOB
AS IF HER UNFOR-TUNATE PERSONAL CIRCUM-STANCES WEREN'T BAD ENOUGH...
SO GREAT IS HER FEAR OF MEN THAT SHE DISFIGURES HER OWN FACE...
...AND EVEN WORRIES ABOUT OUR WELL-BEING...
AND YET SHE BEARS IT ALL WITHOUT A WORD OF COMPLAINT...

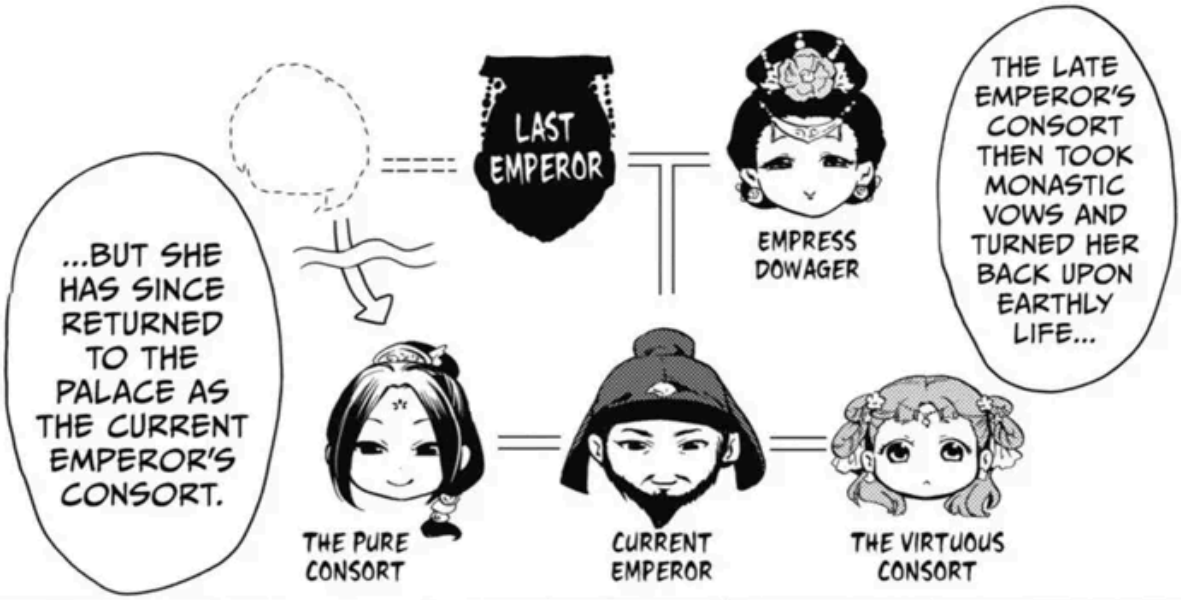
I COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND WHY SIR JINSHI TOOK PITY ON THE POOR GIRL.
TEARY
TEARY
THE JADE PALACE'S THREE LADIES-IN-WAITING ARE ALL EXCEP-TIONAL...
...BUT THEIR IMAGINATIONS ARE EQUALLY IMPRESSIVE.
COME CLOSER TO THE BRAZIER.
...? OKAY.
THEY'RE STILL WARM, SO WE'RE ALL RIGHT.
?
THERE, THERE.
AND YOU, MAOMAO? AREN'T YOU COLD?
YOU DARE ATTEND IN PALE RED?!
DO YOU NOT EVEN KNOW YOUR PLACE?!

THEY DON'T GET ALONG EITHER.
THE LADIES-IN-WAITING TO THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT AND THE PURE CONSORT...

THEY WERE ONCE ESSENTIALLY MOTHER-IN-LAW AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, SO THAT ADDS TO THE FRICTION TOO.
...WHILE CONSORT ADUO IS MUCH OLDER, YOU SEE...
CON-SORT LISHU IS YOUNG ...
THE TWO ARE SO FAR APART IN AGE THAT THEY COULD BE PARENT AND CHILD ...
...SO OF COURSE THEY'RE ALWAYS AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS...

YES.
IT'S A BIT COMPLI-CATED, THOUGH.
THEY WERE IN-LAWS?
DIDN'T EXPECT TO ENCOUNTER THOSE IN PALACE GOSSIP...


FIVE YEARS AGO...
...ONE WAS CONSORT TO THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR, WHILE THE OTHER WAS CONSORT TO THE CROWN PRINCE.
HOWEVER, THEIR RELATION-SHIP WAS TURNED ON ITS HEAD WITH THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR'S PASSING.


LAST EMPEROR
EMPRESS DOWAGER
THE LATE EMPEROR'S CONSORT THEN TOOK MONASTIC VOWS AND TURNED HER BACK UPON EARTHLY LIFE...
...BUT SHE HAS SINCE RETURNED TO THE PALACE AS THE CURRENT EMPEROR'S CONSORT.
THE PURE CONSORT
CURRENT EMPEROR
THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT

...THE PURE CONSORT WAS 30 YEARS OLD...
...AND THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT WAS NINE.
AT THE TIME OF THE LATE EMPEROR'S PASSING...

AHA.
THAT'S WHY THEY HAVE THE SORT OF FRAUGHT RELATION-SHIP YOU'D EXPECT OF IN-LAWS.
HER PARENTS MUST HAVE REAL CLOUT, OR ELSE SUCH A POWER MOVE WOULD BE IMPOSSI-BLE.

POLITICS MAY HAVE DEMANDED IT, BUT THE IDEA OF A NINE-YEAR-OLD CONSORT CERTAINLY GIVES ME PAUSE.

BOING
ばいん
BOING
ばいん
WELL...
...I SUPPOSE I SHOULD BE GLAD THAT HIS MAJESTY DOESN'T TAKE AFTER THE LAST EMPEROR AND SHARE HIS PENCHANT FOR LITTLE GIRLS.
I'VE HEARD HE HAS YET TO BED THE 14-YEAR-OLD VIRTUOUS CONSORT.
HE MAY BE LUSTY, BUT HE PREFERS HIS FRUIT BOUNTIFUL AND RIPE.
BLEEERGH...
AND WHEN I CONSIDER HOW THE ALREADY YOUTHFUL EMPRESS DOWAGER WOULD'VE OFFICIALLY JOINED THE IMPERIAL COURT WHEN SHE WAS EVEN YOUNGER...
IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ME WANT TO VOMIT.
IT'S JUST ABSURD, ISN'T IT?
I MEAN, CAN YOU IMAGINE HAVING A NINE-YEAR-OLD AS YOUR MOTHER-IN-LAW?
?!
?!

LAST EMPEROR
EMPRESS DOWAGER
THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT
CURRENT EMPEROR
THE PURE CONSORT
...WAS LADY LISHU?!
THE LAST EMPEROR'S CONSORT...
SHUDDER
SHUDDER

SWF
TUCK THE PRINCESS INTO HER BASSINET BEFORE SHE CATCHES A CHILL, WON'T YOU?
WELL...
...I'M GOING TO GO GET A FRESHLY WARMED STONE.
OKAY.

MAO-MAO...
HOW IS THE PRINCESS DOING?
SHE SEEMS FINE TO ME.
HMPH!
ムッ VEXED
FWIP
SO SHE'S THE YOUNG MOTHER-IN-LAW?
BOW
ペコリ

I THINK YOU CAN TELL JUST BY LOOKING AT HER...
YES, THAT'S RIGHT.
WAS THAT THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT?
...BUT LADY LISHU IS STILL VERY YOUNG.
THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS ARE EACH GRANTED THEIR OWN EMBLEMATIC GEMS AND COLORS.
CONSORT LIHUA, CRYSTAL AND ULTRA-MARINE BLUE.
CONSORT GYOKUYO HAS JADE AND THE COLOR CRIMSON.

...AND SINCE SHE RESIDES AT THE GARNET PALACE, IT'S PROBABLY SAFE TO ASSUME HER GEMSTONE IS GARNET.
JUDGING BY THE ROBES OF CONSORT ADUO'S LADIES-IN-WAITING, HER COLOR MUST BE BLACK...
IF WE GO BY THE FIVE ELEMENTS, CONSORT LISHU'S COLOR SHOULD BE WHITE...
...BUT THAT GOWN OF DEEP PINK...
...MOST CERTAINLY CLASHES WITH THAT OF CONSORT GYOKUYO.
ざわ MURMUR
PERHAPS SHE'S NOT GOOD AT READING A ROOM...
MURMUR ざわ

ガヤ
CHATTER
CHATTER
ガヤ
EVEN MILITARY MEN AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE BEHIND THE CURTAIN NOW.
THERE SURE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE AROUND SINCE THE FESTIVITIES WENT ON BREAK.
...OH, SO THAT'S WHAT'S GOING ON.
MEH.
SINCE I'M PLANNING TO RETURN TO THE PLEASURE DISTRICT ONCE MY TERM OF SERVICE IS UP...
...IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH ME.
YING-HUA...
THAT'S HOW FOLKS ATTEMPT TO ENTICE AWAY THE MOST EXCEPTIONAL PERSONNEL OF THE INNER COURT.
WAH!
THEY OFFER YOU ADORNMENTS TO TAKE THE PLACE OF THE EMBLEMS YOU ALREADY HAVE.

BUT, YOU SEE...
SQUEAL
...THERE CAN BE OTHER MEANINGS BEHIND THE ORNAMENTS TOO! ♡
WOW, YOU DON'T SAY...
IF IT COMES DOWN TO BEING THAT CREATURE'S PERSONAL MAID...
...I'D RATHER OPT TO BE A DRUDGE AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE...
AWW, C'MON! LISTEN TO MEEEE!
PLAYING DEAD
SHAKE
SHAKE
RIGHT.
SHRIEEEK
I SAID THERE MIGHT BE ULTERIOR MEANINGS BEHIND THEEEM!

!
?
MISS...
I WOULD LIKE YOU TO HAVE THIS.

HE'S A PRETTY BRAWNY SOLDIER.
.....
OH.
...HE CER-TAINLY HAS A LOT OF HAIRPINS IN HIS SASH.
HE MUST BE HANDING THEM OUT FREELY, I GUESS.
STOOP-ING
TREMBLE
TREMBLE
ON TIP-TOE
.....
THANKS.

GRIN
カッ
NICE TO MEET YA!
THE NAME'S LIHAKU!
MAOMAO, DID YOU GET THAT FROM HIM?
...SO TAKING IT WAS WRONG OF ME.
I DOUBT I'LL EVER SEE HIM AGAIN...
HE REMINDS ME OF A DOG.
わら CROWD
LEMME SEE!
わら CROWD
CROWD わら
WELL, SEE YA LATER!
I DON'T THINK IT'S ANYTHING SPECIAL.

SWISH
RECEIVING THAT ALONE MUST MAKE YOU FEEL FORLORN, HMM?

I AM GLAD TO SEE YOU LOOKING WELL.
YES, IT HAS BEEN A WHILE, HASN'T IT?
IT IS AN HONOR TO SEE YOU AGAIN AFTER SO LONG, LADY LIHUA.
FWSH

I HAVE ONLY COME TO GIVE YOU THIS.
I BID YOU GOOD DAY.
WELL, THEN...
...TO DO MORE THAN JUST POUT...
THIS MIGHT GIVE LADY GYOKUYO CAUSE...
OH DEAR.

THEY'VE GOT TO ALL STAY LIKE THAT FOR HOURS ON END.
THEY MUST HAVE IT EVEN WORSE THAN US LADIES-IN-WAITING.
TO THE WEST, THE MILITARY OFFICERS... AND TO THE EAST, THE GOV-ERNMENT OFFICIALS...
...IMPRESSED WITH HOW GRAND A SPECTACLE IT IS.
SINCE I NEED TO TASTE THE FOOD, HONSNIANG SWITCHED OUT WITH ME...
GAZING UPON THIS SIGHT, I'M YET AGAIN...
112

BOW
OH, IT'S GAO SHUN.
IF HE'S SEATED THERE, HIS RANK MUST BE MUCH HIGHER THAN I'D THOUGHT.
HE REALLY DOESN'T LOOK OUT OF PLACE AMONG THE SOLDIERS EITHER.
HE'S SEATED FARTHEST FROM THE EMPEROR, BUT CONSIDERING HIS AGE...
...HE MIGHT ACTUALLY BE THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED OF HIS PEERS.
...THAT'S THE GUY I JUST MET.

GLANCE
ちら
SINCE I CAN'T SPOT HIM AT A GLANCE IN THE CROWD...
...I SUPPOSE THAT SPARKLY EUNUCH WON'T BE JOINING US?
TNK
コトッ

FIRST UP IS AN APERITIF, HMM?
GLUG
とぽ
GLUG
とぽ
A SIL-VER CUP ...
THE LIQUID DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE CLOUDING ON CONTACT WITH THE METAL...
SWIRL
STARE
SWIRL
...SO THERE'S NO ARSENIC IN IT.

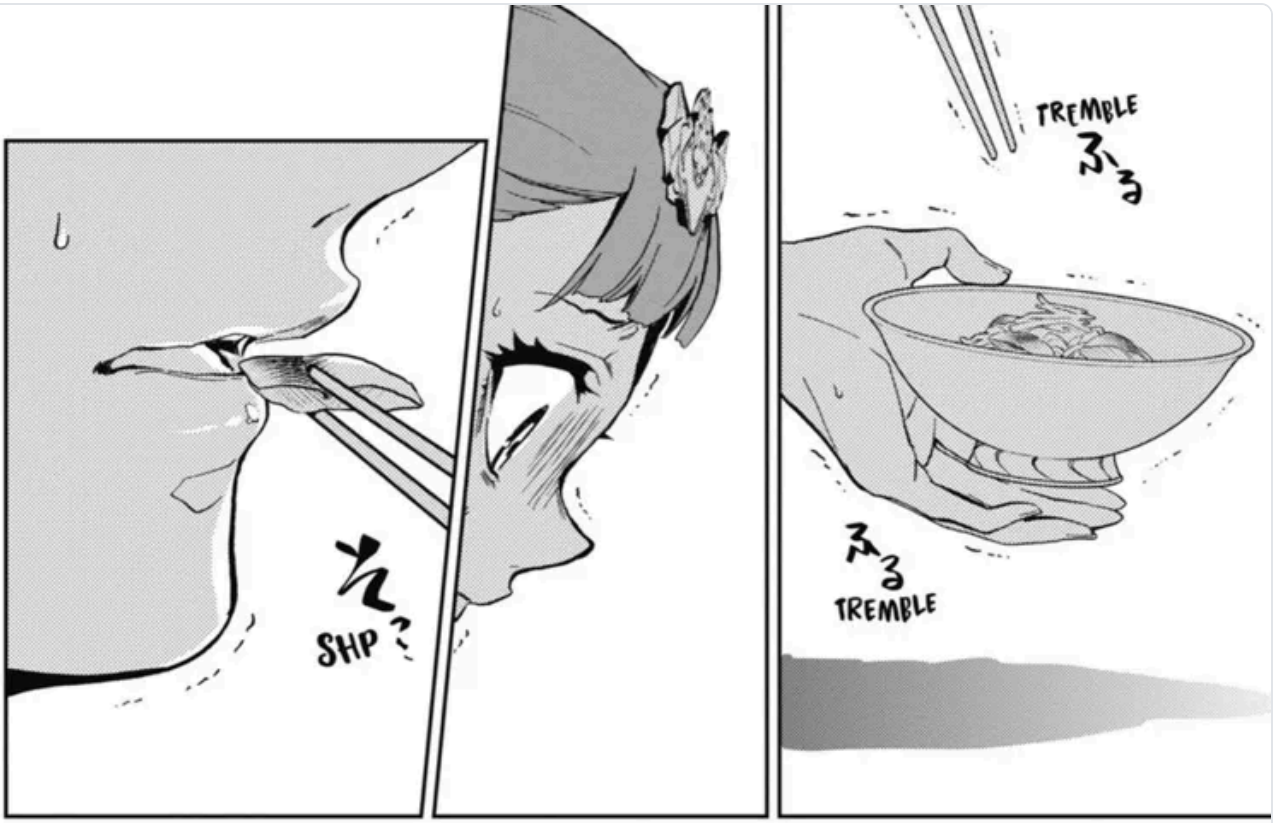
NO ISSUE WITH THE SMELL...
すん SNIFF
すん SNIFF
IT DOESN'T SEEM LIKE THERE'S ANY POISON IN IT.
BUT...
...THE WORK OF A FOOD TASTER IS NOT DONE...
...UNTIL I DRINK IT ALL DOWN.
コクリ。 GULP

NOW TO JUST RINSE OUT MY MOUTH WITH WATER...
CLINK コト
HM?
HUSH
ん
SIP ずず SIP ずず SIP ずず
WHY, IT APPEARS I'M THE CENTER OF ATTEN-TION...

TREMBLE
TREMBLE
TREMBLE
WELL, I GUESS THAT'S TYPICAL.
A TOXIC SUBSTANCE ADMINISTERED AT A BANQUET LIKE THIS WOULD HAVE TO BE THE FAST-ACTING KIND.
NO ONE WANTS TO PROCEED AND EAT SOMETHING THAT WILL KILL THEM.
BLEEEEEERGH!
I'VE LOST COUNT OF THE NUMBER OF TIMES I'VE VOMITED AND PUMPED MY OWN STOMACH ...
...JUST TO SAVOR THAT NUMBING SENSATION ON THE TIP OF MY TONGUE.
SWOON
BUT IF I HAD TO INGEST POISON AND GOT A SAY IN WHICH ONE, I'D GO WITH BLOWFISH.
YES, A SOUP OF ITS THOR-OUGHLY LIQUIFIED GUTS...
MMM...

FOCUS, FOCUS!
PAT
PAT
TAKEN ABACK...
GASP
OOPS. I LET IT SHOW ON MY FACE.
NYEE HEE HOO~!
THIS IS OCCASIONALLY SERVED IN THE INNER COURT FOR SUPPER.
A VINEGARED SALAD OF RAW FISH AND VEGETABLES, HUH?
THEY'VE JUST SUBSTITUTED JELLYFISH FOR THE BLUEBACK FISH HERE.
...THIS DISH MUST HAVE BEEN PREPARED BY SOMEONE FROM THE INNER COURT.
BASED ON THE INGREDIENTS...

SO PERHAPS THEY GAVE US ANOTHER'S TRAY BY MISTAKE?
THOUGH THE MENU REMAINS THE SAME, THEY ADAPT THE DISHES TO THE INDIVIDUAL.
BUT THE FOOD SERVICE HERE IS SKILLED.
I DON'T THINK THEY'D SLIP UP IN MAKING ONE OF HIS MAJESTY'S FAVORITES.
NO POISON.


TREMBLE
TREMBLE
SHP?

DOES THE VIRTUOUS CONSORT DISLIKE BLUEBACK?
BUT IN HIS MAJESTY'S PRESENCE ...
...SHE HAS TO FINISH HER MEAL.

GRIN
ニィ

TNK
コトッ
SOUP'S NEXT, HUH?

フッ!
FWIP
...THAT WAS UN-PLEASANT TO SEE.

LIHAKU, LOOK!
THAT TASTER'S FEARLESSLY GOING FOR EVERYTHING, ONE AFTER THE OTHER!
HOW CAN YOU STAND TO WATCH ...?
WHAT'S SO FUN ABOUT WATCHING SOMEONE EAT AS THEY SHAKE IN FEAR...
...OF BEING POISONED?
OH, THAT TASTER...
WHY, THAT'S THE GIRL I JUST MET.

SCOOP
すっ
STARE
じぃ
SNIFF
スン
SNIFF
スン

くいっ
127

SWOON
ほう…
LICK

BADUMP
BADUMP
J—
JUST HOW GOOD IS THAT SOUP?
BADUMP
BADUMP
BADUMP
GULP
129

I...
...
DETECT POISON.